

## Variant Readings: Why Didn't Muhammad Intervene?

Extant hadith literature recounts several incidents during the Prophet Muhammad's life-time wherein disputes arose among his Companions due to divergent recitations of the Quran. Four prominent narratives detail such occurrences.

The most widely cited incident involves Umar and Hisham ibn Hakim. In this account, Umar physically accosted Hisham, seizing him by the collar and forcibly bringing him to the Prophet. Upon recitation by both Umar and Hisham, the Prophet reportedly validated both versions, stating, "All of them are correct; the Quran was revealed in seven ahruf."<sup>1</sup>

A second incident features Ubay who, upon entering the mosque, encountered two individuals reciting the Quran in a manner unfamiliar to him. Subsequently, Ubay brought the matter to the Prophet's attention, and all three of them recited before him. Again, the Prophet affirmed the legitimacy of all readings. Notably, this episode is reported to have triggered in Ubay a level of doubt regarding Muhammad's prophethood exceeding even his pre-Islamic skepticism.<sup>2</sup>

Further incidents involve Ibn Mas'ud and another individual,<sup>3</sup> and Amr ibn al-'as and yet another person.<sup>4</sup> In each of these cases, a similar pattern emerges: the Prophet consistently validated all presented recitations, informing his Companions of the Quran's revelation in seven ahruf.

These disputes must transcended minor dialectical variations. It is improbable that a difference, such as the substitution of *حتى حين* (*hattā hīn*) for *عنى حين* (*attā hīn*), would have provoked the intensity of Umar's reaction or precipitated the profound doubt experienced by Ubay. The variations, therefore, must have possessed a degree of substantive significance to elicit such strong responses.

Why didn't Muhammad explicitly and publicly clarify to all Muslims, for example in a Friday sermon, that the Quran was revealed in seven ahruf, which could have prevented the repeated disputes among the companions?

Furthermore, the apparent lack of widespread dissemination of this crucial information following the initial incidents warrants scrutiny. Especially considering that at least two of these disputes unfolded publicly within the mosque, in the presence of numerous witnesses, the limited propagation of the "seven ahruf" doctrine is perplexing.

Moreover, the daily practice of congregational prayers, during which the Quran was recited aloud thrice daily, introduces another layer of complexity. If Muhammad consistently employed a singular recitation style in these public prayers, encounters with divergent recitations would predictably lead to inquiries and requests for clarification. And in this case, everyone would be aware of the existence of different recitations of the Quranic text. Conversely, if Muhammad himself varied his recitations during public prayers, the

existence of multiple readings should have been common knowledge within the community, rendering the surprise and disputes less explicable.

#### Sources:

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4706 - «حدثنا سعيد بن عفير قال: حدثني الليث قال: حدثني عقيل، عن ابن شهاب قال: حدثني عروة بن الزبير: أن المسور بن مخرمة وعبد الرحمن بن عبد القاري حدثاه: أنهما سمعا عمر بن الخطاب يقول: سمعت هشام بن حكيم يقرأ سورة الفرقان في حياة رسول الله، فاستمعت لقراءته، فإذا هو يقرأ على حروف كثيرة لم يقرئنيها رسول الله، فكذبت أساوره في الصلاة، فتصبرت حتى سلم، فلبنته بردائه فقلت: من أقرأك هذه السورة التي سمعتك تقرأ؟ قال: أقرأنيها رسول الله، فقلت: كذبت، فإن رسول الله قد أقرأنيها على غير ما قرأت، فانطلقت به أقوده إلى رسول الله، فقلت: إني سمعت هذا يقرأ بسورة الفرقان على حروف لم تقرئنيها، فقال رسول الله: (أرسله، اقرأ يا هشام). فقرأ عليه القراءة التي سمعته يقرأ، فقال رسول الله: (كذلك أنزلت). ثم قال: (اقرأ يا عمر). فقرأت القراءة التي أقرأني، فقال رسول الله (كذلك أنزلت). صحيح البخاري، دمشق 1993، ج 5 ص 1909.

DeepL translation:

4706 - Sa'id ibn 'Afir said: Al-Leith said: 'Aqeel told me about Ibn Shihab, who said: 'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr told me: Al-Masur ibn Mukhrima and Abdul Rahman ibn Abdul Qari told him that they heard 'Umar ibn al-Khattab say: They heard 'Umar ibn al-Khattab say: I heard Hisham ibn Hakim reading Surat al-Furqan during the life of the Messenger of Allah, so I listened to his reading, and if he was reading on many letters that the Messenger of Allah did not read to me, I was almost upset with him in prayer, so I was patient until he prayed, so I wrapped him in his robe and said: "Who read you this Surat al-Furqan that I heard you reading?" He said: "The Messenger of Allah read it to me, so I said: "You lie, the Messenger of Allah has read it to me differently from what you read, so I went to lead him to the Messenger of Allah and said: I heard this man reading Surat al-Furqan on letters you did not read to me, so the Messenger of Allah said: Send him. He read the reading that I heard him read, and Allah's Apostle said, "That is how it was revealed. Then he said: "Read, 'Umar. The Messenger of Allah said, 'Send him, read the reading I heard him read, and the Messenger of Allah said, 'So it was revealed. Sahih al-Bukhari, Damascus, 1993, p. 1909.

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273 - (820) حدثنا محمد بن عبد الله بن نمير. حدثنا أبي. حدثنا إسماعيل بن أبي خالد عن عبد الله بن عيسى بن عبد الرحمن ابن أبي ليلى، عن جده، عن أبي بن كعب؛ قال: كنت في المسجد. فدخل رجل يصلي. فقرأ قراءة أنكرتها عليه. ثم دخل آخر. فقرأ قراءة سوى قراءة صاحبه. فلما قضينا الصلاة دخلنا جميعاً على رسول الله. فقلت: إن هذا قرأ قراءة أنكرتها عليه. ودخل آخر فقرأ سوى قراءة صاحبه. فأمرهما رسول الله فقرأ. فحسن النبي شأنهما. فسقط

في نفسي من التكذيب. ولا إذا كنت في الجاهلية. فلما رأى رسول الله ما قد غشيتني ضرب في صدري. ففضت عرقاً. وكأنا أنظر إلى الله فرقا. فقال لي "يا أباي! أرسل إلي: أن أقرأ القرآن على حرف. فرددت إليه: أن هون على أمتي. فرد

إلى الثانية: اقرأه على حرفين. فرددت إليه: أن هون على أمتي. فرد إلى الثالثة: اقرأه على سبعة أحرف. فلك بكل ردة رددتها مسألة تسألينها. فقلت: اللهم! اغفر لأمتي. وأخرت الثالثة ليوم يرغب إلى الخلق كلهم. حتى إبراهيم»  
**صحيح مسلم، القاهرة 1955، ص 561.**

DeepL translation:

"273 - (820) We spoke with Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Numair. We talked to my father. Ismail ibn Abi Khalid told us about Abdullah ibn Isa ibn Abdulrahman ibn Abi Laila, from his grandfather, from Abi ibn Ka'b; he said:

I was in the mosque. A man entered praying. He read a reading that I disapproved of. Then another man entered. He read a reading other than that of his companion. When we finished the prayer, we all entered the Messenger of Allah. I said: "This man read a reading that I disliked. Another came in and read other than his companion. Allah's Apostle ordered them to read. The Prophet favored them. So I fell in my soul from disbelief. Not if I was in jahiliyyah. When the Messenger of Allah saw what had happened to me, he struck me in the chest. I broke out in sweat. It was as if I was looking at God for fear. He said to me, "O my father! Send me: Recite the Qur'an on a letter. I replied to him: "Make it easy for my Ummah. He sent me the second: Read it in two letters. I replied to him: "Make it easy for my Ummah. He replied to me the third time: Read it on seven letters. For every reply you give, you will have a question to ask. I said: O Allah! Forgive my nation. I delayed the third one for a day when he would desire all of creation. Even Ibrahim "

*Sahih Muslim, Cairo 1955, p. 561.*

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8108 - «أَخْبَرَنَا مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ يَعْقُوبَ الْخَطِيبُ بِالْأَهْوَازِ، قَالَ: حَدَّثَنَا مَعْمَرُ بْنُ سَهْلٍ، قَالَ: حَدَّثَنَا عَامِرُ بْنُ مُدْرِكٍ، قَالَ: حَدَّثَنَا إِسْرَائِيلُ، عَنْ عَاصِمٍ، عَنْ زَرٍّ، عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ مَسْعُودٍ، قَالَ: أَقْرَأَنِي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ سُورَةَ الرَّحْمَنِ، فَخَرَجْتُ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ عَشِيَّةً، فَجَلَسْتُ إِلَى رَهْطٍ، فَقُلْتُ لِرَجُلٍ: اقْرَأْ عَلَيَّ، فَإِذَا هُوَ يَقْرَأُ أَحْرَفًا لَا أَقْرَأُهَا، فَقُلْتُ: مَنْ أَقْرَأَكَ؟ فَقَالَ: أَقْرَأَنِي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ، فَأَنْطَلَقْنَا حَتَّى وَقَفْنَا عَلَى النَّبِيِّ، فَقُلْتُ: اخْتَلَفْنَا فِي قِرَاءَتِنَا، فَإِذَا وَجْهُ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ فِيهِ تَغْيِيرٌ، وَوَجَدَ فِي نَفْسِهِ جِبِينَ ذَكَرْتُ الْإِخْتِلَافَ، فَقَالَ: "إِنَّمَا هَلَكَ مَنْ قَبْلَكُمْ بِالْإِخْتِلَافِ"، فَأَمَرَ عَلِيًّا، فَقَالَ: إِنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ يَقْرَأَ كُلُّ رَجُلٍ مِنْكُمْ كَمَا عَلِمَ، فَإِنَّمَا أَهْلَكَ مَنْ كَانَ قَبْلَكُمْ الْإِخْتِلَافَ، قَالَ: فَأَنْطَلَقْنَا وَكُلُّ رَجُلٍ مِنْهَا يَقْرَأُ حَرْفًا لَا يَقْرَأُ صَاحِبُهُ».

**صحيح ابن حبان، بيروت 2012، ج 2 ص 167.**

DeepL translation:

- 8108"Mu'ammār ibn Sahl, said: 'Amir ibn Mudarik, said: 'Amir ibn Mudarik, said: Israel, from 'Asim, from Zir, from 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ud, said: The Messenger of Allah read to me the Surah al-Rahman, so I went out to the mosque one evening, and a group of people sat down to me: "Read to me," and I said to a man: "Who read you?" He said: "I read it to

you. "Who read to you?" He said, "The Messenger of Allah read to me." We went on until we stood before the Prophet, and I said: We differed in our recitation, and the face of the Messenger of Allah changed, and he felt a change in his soul when I mentioned the disagreement, and he said, "The people before you perished through disagreement." He then ordered Ali and said: "The Messenger of Allah commands each of you to recite as he has been taught, for what destroyed those who were before you was disagreement." He said: We went away, each of us reciting a letter that his companion did not recite".

*Sahih Ibn Habban*, Beirut, 2012, vol. 2, p. 167

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«حدثنا عبد الله بن صالح، عن الليث، عن يزيد بن الهاد، عن محمد بن إبراهيم، عن بسر بن سعيد، عن أبي قيس مولى عمرو بن العاص، أن رجلاً قرأ آية من القرآن، فقال له عمرو بن العاص: إنما هي كذا وكذا بغير ما قرأ الرجل، فقال الرجل: هكذا أقرأنيها رسول الله، فخرجنا إلى رسول الله حتى أتياه، فنكرا ذلك له، فقال رسول الله: «إن هذا القرآن نزل على سبعة أحرف، فأبي ذلك قرأتم أصبتم، فلا تماروا في القرآن، فإن مرأى فيه كفر»  
أبو عبيد، *فضائل القرآن*، بيروت 1995، ص 337.

DeepL translation:

"Abdullah ibn Salih told us about Al-Leith, about Yazid ibn Al-Had, about Muhammad ibn Ibrahim, about Bisr ibn Saeed, about Abu Qais, the servant of Amr ibn Al-As, that a man recited a verse of the Qur'an: The man said: "This is how the Messenger of Allah read it to me." They went to the Messenger of Allah until they came to him and mentioned this to him, and the Messenger of Allah said: "This Qur'an was revealed on seven letters, so whichever one you read, you are correct, but do not dispute in the Qur'an, for disputing in it is blasphemy".

Abu Ubaid, *Fada'il al-Quran*, Beirut, 1995, p. 337.